

## EDITORIAL

When *Journal of Management Studies* issued its call for papers on the topic of organizational learning, the editors of this issue were by no means sure of the kinds of contributions that would be forthcoming. The term, 'organizational learning', has been used in many different ways and figures in many different sorts of research enterprise (as Shrivastava's paper in this volume makes clear). In our review of the papers submitted, we tried to make selections based on only two criteria: that the authors should have addressed themselves in some substantive way to the topic of organizational learning, and that the papers should be of high quality. As a result, we have assembled a group of seven papers which are a kind of projective test. It is possible to see in them a number of different themes, depending on the observer's perspective. In these few pages, we offer our own reading of this material. The reader should, and doubtless will, feel free to construct his own!

It is probably a truism to say that organizations are technologies designed to help people manage activities of high complexity. Historically, the bulk of the literature on organizations has dealt with the problem of exercising control over organizational activity. Control, in turn, has been decomposed into the tasks of designing jobs so that they are easily accomplished, establishing authority to oversee and coordinate the performance of those jobs, and constructing information systems designed to strengthen the control of those in control. This emphasis is understandable. It is not easy for managers to encompass and tame organizational complexity. Furthermore, there are the understandable demands of the Boards of Directors, Civil Service systems, voters, and others who monitor the stewardship of organizational administrators.

During the past several decades of organizational practice and research, however, it has become increasingly clear that, while control is a necessary requirement for good and effective organization, it is not sufficient. Controls can go astray. New conditions arise and demand new modes of organizational attention, enhanced capacity for detecting and correcting errors or filling gaps in organizational management. The continually changing conditions of organizational environments require, in other words, organizations that are able to learn, especially to re-examine and restructure fundamental practices, policies and values.

The difficulty is that as managers evolve more efficient techniques of control they tend to create conditions that inhibit organizational capacity for learning about the consequences of control. There is a tension between control and learning, both of which are nevertheless central to organizational survival and development. It is not appropriate, we believe, to emphasize one at the expense of the other. To focus on learning without also

taking into account legitimate needs for control is to embark on a romantic and usually a fruitless exercise. To deal with the troublesome consequences of existing systems of control through the very common managerial strategy of increased control is to guarantee the slow but inevitable deterioration of organizational performance.

As we reflect on the papers we have received, we are struck by the different ways in which they touch on the tension between learning and control. Wildavsky observes how the information used to manage organizations may often accumulate in amounts that overwhelm or threaten the organization. Participants then try to cope with the problem by 'bootlegging' or 'by-passing', activities which must be camouflaged, in turn, lest the participants be accused of disloyalty. But the very act of camouflage may exacerbate errors and trigger new forms of protection. Etheredge and Short suggest that similar dysfunctions arise in governmental systems. They, too, identify ways in which attempts at increased managerial control inhibit organizational capacity to learn about the central dilemmas of governmental bureaucracy.

Lanzara provides us with an illustration of the limitations and counter-productive intrusions of governmental bureaucracy during a national crisis—an earthquake. Human beings on the scene begin to develop informal, 'ephemeral' organizational arrangements that appear to work. Yet as the government is denounced for not being 'in control', it moves into place a bureaucratic system which smothers some of the very activities that have been helpful.

Petrie and Alpert describe a similar process at work in the field of higher education. Higher education, seen as being 'in trouble', pursues financial retrenchment. The authors, who agree that corrections must be made in the policies and practices of higher education, argue against a solution conceived exclusively as one of 'getting costs under control'. With such a framing of the problem, cuts will be made, but in such a way as actually to reinforce the processes that got higher education into trouble in the first place. The authors recommend for institutions of higher education a thorough self-examination with a view to reducing costs while simultaneously modifying the rigid structures and practices which have contributed to the legacy of financial constraints and conflicted policy in higher education.

Ackoff frames an analogous dilemma of learning and control. He points out that the more accurately administrators can predict their future, the less effectively they can prepare for it; while the more effectively they prepare for the future, the less need there is for accurate prediction. Ackoff proposes that managers should design and make the futures they prefer. But this is a mode of planning whose effectiveness depends on a very rare capacity for organizational learning.

A second theme runs through these papers, one that is not so much announced by the authors as it is exemplified by their work. It has to do with methodology. If we wish to learn more about organizational learning,

and its sometimes conflicting interactions with organizational control, by what methods should we do so? For this material what kind of knowledge can we hope to get, and what kinds of inquiry are likely to enable us to get it? The authors of these papers seem to share a way of answering these questions. They employ a method which might be described as 'learning by reflecting on the phenomena of organizational practice'. Although they differ among themselves with respect to the kind and level of problem they consider, they all begin by reflecting on the world of practice, attempting to make sense of it through constructions which may be tested eventually through the redesign and reshaping of practice.

We suggest that there is an important meaning in the authors' shared use of the method of reflective construction of organizational reality. The methods of social science inquiry which have been in good currency in recent decades have emphasized survey research methodology, statistical analysis of quantitative data, and approximations to the controlled experimentation of laboratory research in the natural sciences—all based upon a theory of control similar to the one used by executives to design and manage organizations. The theory's counter-productive consequences for organizational learning also obtain, we believe, in social science research. The dominant methodologies of the social sciences may embody contradictions similar to those we find in organizations (Argyris, 1980). On the other hand, the method of reflection on practice illustrated by the authors of the papers in this volume—and explicitly described by Lipshitz in his account of the uses of cognitive and behavioural research in leadership training—are fundamentally similar to the methods by which some managers intuitively reflect on and learn from their own practice (Argyris, 1982; Schön, 1982).

We believe that the most effective methods for the study of organizational learning are forms of action science grounded in systematic and appropriately rigorous reflections on individual and organizational practice. Studies of organizational learning useful to practitioners should be tested by interventions aimed at helping practitioners make new and better sense of their organizational experience.

CHRIS ARGYRIS

*Harvard University*

DONALD A. SCHÖN

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

#### NOTES

ARGYRIS, CHRIS (1980). *The Inner Contradictions of Rigorous Research*. New York: Academic Press.

ARGYRIS, CHRIS (1982). *Reasoning, Learning and Action, Individual and Organizational*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

SCHÖN, DONALD A. (1982). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.